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SUBJECT: BELIZEAN CHILDREN SEXUALLY EXPLOITED, ILO/IPEC SAYS

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Summary  
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1. According to the National Committee for Families and Children (NCFC) the results of its study on the commercial sexual exploitation of child and adolescents (CSEC) in Belize Q conducted in cooperation with the International Labour OfficeQs (ILO) International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) Q not only confirm the existence of CSEC in Belize, but also highlight the shortfalls in the countryQs response to the problem. The research reveals that poverty is a major factor in CSEC and that, contrary to popular belief, most abusers are Belizean rather than foreign. Because BelizeQs laws and social system do not currently address CSEC, ILO/IPEC recommends changes in the areas of prevention, legislation, and capacity building. Relevant GoB agenci local NGOs, and international organizations will have to work together invest significant amounts of time and resources to ensure successful implementation of any reforms. End summary.

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What Is CSEC?  
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2. ILO/IPEC describes CSEC as Qthe use of persons under the age of 18 for paid sexual relations or for child and adolescent pornography, or the use of boys, girls and adolescents for sex shows or videos.Q Some form of economic exchange or payment Q either to the child or adolescent or to an intermediary Q must also be present. Client-exploiters will p in cash, but many also pay for food, school fees, utility bills, or ren

3. On October 26, the National Committee for Families and Children (NC announced the results of its study on the commercial sexual exploitatio children and adolescents (CSEC) inBelize. Representatives from the Go (Ministries of Human Development, Education, and Labour), local NGOs (Y Enhancement Services), international organizations (UNICEF), police and media attended the presentation. The study, conducted in cooperation w the International Labour OfficeQs (ILO) International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), revealed not only that CSEC exists in Belize, but that in many instances it is tolerated and parents are complicit in the crime.

4. NCFC Chairperson Sandra Hall noted that while Belize is a signatory several international conventions Q including the Convention on the Rig of the Child and ILO Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst For of Child Labour Q the country is failing its children. During his keyn address Valdemar Castillo, Minister of State in the Ministry of Educati and Labour, stated that the study confirmed what many Belizeans already suspected and pledged to do more to combat CSEC. Researchers offered a number of recommendations to ensure the protection of children and adol in Belize.

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Methodology  
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5. Researchers hoped the study would enable them to identify the

characteristics of CSEC and understand the related risk factors. At the same time, the study was devised to gauge the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of adults, particularly males, about CSEC and assess the country's ability to address the problem.

¶16. To gain a better grasp of CSEC, researchers reviewed relevant documents (such as newspaper articles, policy papers, and periodic reports on international conventions); interviewed key service providers within the public, civil society, and private sectors; observed activity in areas considered to have a high prevalence of CSEC; and interviewed a total of 56 adults and 30 children under the age of 18. Staffing and resource limitations prohibited a country-wide survey; instead, researchers focused on the Belize District (which includes Belize City, the country's most populous city), Cayo District (which includes Belmopan, the capital), and Orange Walk (an area known for its bars and brothels). The interviews were conducted by psychiatric, rural, and community health nurses living and working in the three areas. Each nurse also received training to ensure their sensitivity to gender and human rights issues.

#### Who Are the Victims and Abusers?

¶17. Researchers surveyed 30 victims of CSEC, both male and female, and that while this number is not representative of Belize's population, the results offer insight into the victims' experiences. Most of the victims surveyed were 16-17 years old, poor, and under-educated. Many lived with only one parent or were raised by another family member; some did not know or no longer had a relationship with their fathers. Most of the victims were paid for sexual intercourse, although some were solicited for other CSEC activities such as nude dancing, photography, or film. The study also found that the victims' parents are sometimes complicit, encouraging their children to engage in the activity to pay for rent, school books, or other expenses.

¶18. Researchers questioned 56 adults in Belize District, Cayo District, Orange Walk to determine their perceptions about CSEC. While the majority of adults believed that children and adolescents engage in CSEC to alleviate poverty, some also blamed the victims. Many of those surveyed believe the victims lack morals or actually enjoy sexual exploitation. Some also blamed adults, stating that adults have bad morals or create a demand for CSEC. Most surveyed knew of places in their home districts where CSEC activities occur and had heard of people involved in CSEC. Finally, although the majority of adults said they would do something (call police, talk to an adult) if they learned or saw CSEC activity, in reality only 11 had ever denounced CSEC activities.

¶19. Contrary to the popular belief that CSEC is a crime committed by foreign client-exploiters, ILO/IPEC reports that only eight of the 30 victims stated that their client-exploiters were foreign tourists or foreign men residing in Belize. The majority of client-exploiters were Belizean men between the ages of 18 and 50. After engaging 44 men in focus groups in different parts of the country, the researchers found common themes. These men rationalize the sexual exploitation of children by making a distinction between sex with prepubescent and pubescent children. Once a child passes the 90-pound test (i.e., the child weighs more than 90 pounds and is, therefore, physically developed), then sex with him/her becomes acceptable. In addition, the study described Belize as a patriarchal culture where greater priority is given to fulfilling the men's needs at any cost. Finally, the study reports that these men will even deflect responsibility onto the child, arguing that the victim tempted or seduced them.

#### An Integral Part of Belize Society

¶20. Several local NGOs, such as Youth Enhancement Services and YWCA, report that commercial sexual exploitation is common among young Belizean women. They describe the activity as an integral part of Belize society. Two common modes of operation are "hit me on the hip" and "dalla wap." "Hit me on the hip" refers to the practice of girls, many of whom are still in school, who receive cellular phone text messages from an intermediary alerting them to a meeting with a client-exploiter. These girls will then find a way to meet the client, even if this means pretending to be ill to be released from school. "Dalla wap" refers to the popular fried chicken sold by Chinese vendors for as little as BZ\$1.00. (Note: US\$1 equals BZ\$2. End note). In the country, children provide commercial sex services in exchange for fried chicken food.

¶11. Belize is signatory to several international conventions and instruments that address child abuse and children's rights. In addition, the National Action for Children and Adolescents in Belize 2004-2015 recognizes CSEC as a problem and aims to reduce the incidence of all forms of child abuse by 50 percent. Problems remain, however, in the country's legislation. For example, the law contains inconsistencies in the definition of a child. The Lab defines a child as under the age of 14 while the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Belize) defines a child as under the age of 18. In addition, the laws use language like "known immoral character" or "common prostitute" that can prejudice the case against the victim. Belize law is gender-biased and assumes that only females can be raped or sexually exploited. The Evidence Act does not allow children under the age of 7 to give evidence even when they are capable of doing so, and requires corroboration in cases of carnal knowledge involving children but not for other victims of sexual violence. Finally, the Criminal Code imposes different penalties for sexual offenses on the age of the child. For example, a convicted perpetrator of incest is sentenced to 7 years imprisonment if the victim is between the ages of 18, or 12 years to life imprisonment if the victim is under the age of 18.

¶12. The commercialization of sexual activity is not addressed in the law. Instead, most sexual offenses against children are classified as "carnal knowledge" (defined as sexual relations with a female child under the age of 16) or "unlawful carnal knowledge" (defined as sexual relations with a female between the ages of 14 and 16). Convictions in these cases are few. Statistics gathered from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions indicate that from 2002 to 2005, only 8 percent of unlawful carnal knowledge cases resulted in convictions. The rest were dropped by the prosecution (due to lack of evidence or withdrawal of the case by the parent) or resulted in acquittals.

¶13. The report highlights other institutional challenges in responding to CSEC: financial and human resource constraints limit institutions' ability to provide legal aid, to counsel, or assist CSEC victims or those at risk; a lack of effective management and coordination among the institutions in the child protection system; and a lack of training for prosecutors, police, social workers and medical officers to ensure an effective response to CSEC.

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Recommendations  
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¶14. ILO/IPEC's recommendations are divided into three key areas: prevention of CSEC, legal reform, and strengthening institutions.

**Prevention of CSEC:** Belizeans must first recognize CSEC as a crime rather than a culturally acceptable practice and then their behavior has to change. The study suggests behavioral change programs targeting men that stress more positive concepts of masculinity and encourage respect for human rights and responsible sexual behavior. Sexual and reproductive health education should be made available to children of all ages, and human rights and gender equality education should be mainstreamed throughout the Belizean school system. At the same time, the government of Belize (GoB) must make child protection a priority and develop economic assistance programs that target families in poverty.

**Legal Reform:** Researchers suggest developing one law which amends all legislation related to crimes of sexual violence against children and addresses the existing gaps. The law should:

- criminalize the commercial sexual exploitation of children under the law;
- harmonize the legal definition of a child;
- remove prejudicial concepts of morality from the law;
- be gender-neutral to protect boys as well as girls;
- protect witnesses and children;
- make evidentiary procedures more child-friendly; and
- institute stiffer penalties for perpetrators.

**Strengthening Institutions:** The study recommends the development of a Victims Unit within the police department, staffed with police officers who have been trained to deal with CSEC cases and victims. Social workers should receive training, and their numbers increased, so that they can strengthen their ability to respond to and manage CSEC cases. Finally, service providers in relevant institutions must develop resources (counseling, education, health care) to assist CSEC victims and those who are at risk.

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Comment  
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¶15. The ILO/IPEC study is the first to focus specifically on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Belize. Although the sample size was small, the study exposes many of the perceptions and misconceptions about the crime and perpetrators of this crime. Local and international organizations, including GoB agencies already involved in children's rights and human rights in Belize welcomed the study's results as confirmation of a problem that has long been ignored. While the initial reaction is important, the implementation is key and this is often where Belize falls short. The study's recommendations will require significant commitments in time, personnel, and finances.

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